

PARTNERSHIP FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH & SAFETY IN SCHOOLS: A MENTORING OPPORTUNITY FOR BUSINESSES

POTENTIAL TASKS

In schools, serious chemical management issues have been discovered. These problems, such as large chemical stockpiles, highly hazardous materials, and unsafe chemical use, storage, and disposal practices, are consistently observed in secondary schools statewide. Whether urban or rural, high or low-income, large or small, similar problems with chemical safety are found in schools.

The problems with chemical safety present in schools, and their solutions, have been well identified by governmental environmental agencies. The current challenge is to help schools recognize and correct these problems. This can be a complex and long-term process as systemic change is required to truly solve these issues.

The expertise and prestige of industry may help facilitate positive change in schools. The presence of an industry mentor, even with very few staff hours engaged, could provide the needed momentum for schools to move forward and greatly improve the health and safety of their schools. Industry mentors can provide expertise in environmental health and safety as well as organizational issues. Industry support will ensure that a school does not drop the project or lose steam. Without this support, past experiences indicate that many schools start making changes, and then quickly revert back to old methods and systems.

To achieve and sustain success, it is ideal if the industry mentor makes a long-term commitment to the school partner. This does not need to be a major time sink or resource commitment. The actual time required per month or even per year can be as little as a few hours, as positive results will be achieved with small, sustained support.

Some illustrations of mentor involvement are as follows:

- Attend meetings of the school's Environmental, Health, and Safety Team (or equivalent committee) and help with policy development (these meetings would generally occur monthly or less frequently). The school is not likely to currently have such a team. Getting this team going is often the first step a school makes towards change.
- Conduct annual Right-to-Know training for school staff (requires a few hours per year, and could be shifted to the school using a train the trainers approach).
- Aid the school in developing a screening process for chemical purchase, similar to that used by many industrial facilities (will probably require at

least a few hours a month until it gets going, and then only periodic check-in is needed).

- Review current chemical storage, use, and/or disposal practices and provide recommendations for improved safety. (This could occur once, or could occur annually as a check-in).

In aiding with a chemical clean-out, there are also a number of one-time discrete tasks involved in this process that a mentor could assist with:

- Conduct a chemical safety pre-screen.
- Conduct a chemical audit, and highlight hazardous chemicals that should be targeted for removal and substitution.
- Aid the school in contracting for and conducting a chemical removal, including assistance in selecting chemicals for removal.

Once a school has reduced their chemical stockpile, the following tasks could occur once or continue annually as a check-in:

- Conduct a full chemical audit, ensuring that disallowed chemicals are not present.
- Review chemical storage practices.
- Review chemical use practices.
- Review chemical disposal practices.

In addition to these suggestions, the mentor or school partner may devise other creative ways to work together and foster improved chemical safety. In fact, even a periodic “check-in” by the industry mentor with the school may be enough to keep improvement moving forward. For more information about the school mentor program please contact Susan Lanza at 617-626-1068 or by email: susan.lanza@state.ma.us.